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First and foremost the classroom must be viewed as a social setting where the child interacts with teacher and peers. Thus, while preparing the child for reading and other academic activities, the teacher should not only consider the intellectual, emotional, and physical readiness of the child, but the social readiness as well. Too often this area is overlooked when the readiness of the child is being determined.

Development of Social Readiness

The development of social readiness is the result of the experiences of the child. The home environment makes one of the greatest contributions to the child's social readiness because the quality of the relationship with parents molds the behavior of the child, and this behavior influences the rapport the child will have with teachers and peers.

Some overindulgent parents baby their child. Subjected to parental pampering, the child might develop strong dependency ties which can create problems when he enters school and must be away from parental contact for a large portion of the day. A child from this type of home is a "victim of oversolicitousness" (Schubert & Torgerson, p. 42).

The child from a strict environmental background can also have problems adjusting to school. Some parents espouse the philosophy that children should be seen but not heard, and the child is taught to be quiet at home. When the reticent child starts to school, he is expected to interact with the teacher and peers. By improperly attempting to implement this interaction, the teacher could cause severe shyness and withdrawal which must be overcome before the child can socialize with others, express his own ideas, and fully profit from instructional opportunities.

On the other hand, where parental discipline is lax, the child is not likely to possess the self-control which is necessary for maximum growth in learning to read. Without the needed self-control, the child creates problems for himself, his teacher, and his peers.

A child from a broken home may have difficulty developing the social skills which are necessary for academic success. In most cases, the home environment is unstable for a period of time before separation or divorce. The child may have been unwanted, rejected, unloved, and possibly abused, which would not promote conditions for optimum social development. The broken home has the greatest impact on the child when "the cause of the disruption is one about which the family is ashamed, such as illegitimacy or imprisonment" (Harris, p. 41).

Whether the child lives with his natural parents, a single parent, or foster parents will determine his environmental experiences. By living with natural or foster parents, the child would probably have more opportunities

to interact socially than a child who lives with a single parent. The single parent situation affords only one person with whom the child can communicate; and, in most instances, there is little time for this interaction.

Foster parents can give the child the same opportunities for social development as natural parents. However, a child might resent foster parents; this resentment may cause deep social and emotional stress even though the foster parents sincerely love and care for him.

Contact with other children also has an effect on the child's development. The number and ages of siblings greatly influence the child. Research has shown that "the smaller the age difference (between siblings), the greater the likelihood of sibling help (with reading) – particularly when the next older sibling is a girl" (Durkin, p. 136). If the child comes from a large, close family, he may have already developed the social skills that are needed for functioning in academic activities. On the other hand, if the child comes from a small family where there are large age differences between siblings, or if he is an only child, the opportunity for the development of social skills may be limited.

The child's social skills could have been developed in play school or nursery school. These experiences with other children his own age could enable the child to acquire the important social skills of sharing, cooperating, taking turns, and verbally interacting with others.

Nevertheless, the child may enter school without having had any experiences as a member of a group as large as that usually found in the typical classroom. A child with this limited background may overreact in the classroom – with shyness or aggressiveness. Consequently, the child must be dealt with diplomatically. If he is shy and withdrawn, he must be given security. If he is bold and overly aggressive, he must be taught to share and cooperate with other children and respect their rights.

Although a specific experiential background does not dictate a particular social outcome, the behavior of the child does reflect the impact of these experiences. As a general rule, the environment provided by the natural parents coupled with good nursery school or play school experiences is recognized as being the most socially beneficial to the child.

Social Readiness

In order to determine if the child is socially ready for reading activities, the teacher should look for the following characteristics:

1. The child should listen attentively when a peer or the teacher is talking. Good listening is a major social skill and is essential for the development of auditory discrimination and the application of phonics.
2. The child must work harmoniously with his peers by sharing instructional materials and taking turns. Very soon in school a "child's individual pursuits are gradually abandoned to make way for more social enterprises" (Russell, p. 83), and "the ability to participate actively and cooperatively in group activities is . . . (an) extremely important aspect of social development" (Harris, p. 40).
3. The child should speak in sentences which are readily intelligible to

other children and to the teacher. In other words, "a child must be able to use and understand language" (Smith & Johnson, p. 72). The child should frequently engage in oral conversations with other members of the class, and the communication should be pleasurable and should increase in frequency as the child grows socially.

4. The child should be able to comprehend directions and respond accordingly. Effective learning, in most cases, is dependent upon the child's ability to follow instructions given to him by the teacher.

5. The child should assume responsibility for correctly utilizing and replacing materials and equipment used in the classroom.

6. The child should be able to maintain self-control in situations involving social, physical, and emotional conflict; and, by so doing, the child will accomplish perhaps one of the most important prerequisites to success in reading. The child who does not have this self-control may resort to antisocial behavior which can disrupt classroom activities and can result in rejection by peers on the playground.

7. The child should be able to plan, pursue, and conclude assigned tasks successfully. Following through with assignments and completing tasks are important academic and social traits.

8. The child should be able to satisfy his personal and academic needs in a socially acceptable manner, whether working by himself or in a group. However, the child should "be free to be himself within the confines of the group or class in which he works" (Stauffer, p. 158).

The age and maturational level of the child will determine the degree to which the above characteristics will be developed. Of course, the more precocious child would develop the skills sooner.

Recommendations for Reading Teachers

After determining the areas in which the child needs further social development, the reading teacher should make plans for this growth. There are some basic actions that should be taken by the teacher to promote social development.

1. The teacher should provide many opportunities for success in order for the child to develop a sense of security in the classroom.

2. The teacher should give the child opportunities to interact with other children under the teacher's controlling influence. This gives the child a chance to "come out" if he is shy, or to display his "best" behavior if he tends to be overly aggressive. In relationships with other children, the child should learn to compete without becoming belligerent, to conform without losing his creativity, and to compromise without losing his integrity.

3. The teacher should give the child responsibilities which are within his ability range.

4. The teacher should plan many activities whereby the child can speak in front of a small group or the entire class, but the child should never be forced to do so. For the shy child, this should be a gradual process. The teacher should gain the child's confidence; and, over a period of time,

the teacher should encourage him to interact with others. For the overanxious "chatter box," a group activity may provide an opportunity for him to learn to listen.

Summary

Though often underemphasized, social development is an important and integral part of reading readiness. The reading teacher must be aware of the social skills needed for productive growth in reading and the techniques involved in developing them. The teacher must take an inventory of the social development of the children in the class and plan for each child's socialization in those areas where a need is indicated.

Social liberties in the classroom are given for the development of each child and are restricted when behavior becomes detrimental to the welfare of the individual or the group. The classroom represents a module of democracy; its atmosphere must promote optimum conditions for social growth and learning within a structured setting. Every child must possess or develop the social skills necessary for making the most of the educational process.

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